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ABSTRACT

To be effective, information on early childhood education should (1) be directed towards the appropriate audience, (2) be written so that it is understandable to that audience, and (3) provide data to help the user make meaningful judgements. The wide range of educaticnal and occupational levels of people working in the field of early childhood education necessitates different treatments of the same message. Moreover, there is a need for more feedback between the researcher and the practitioner to direct research to the salient problems and to make the results of research more useable. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education (ERIC/ECE) is an information analysis center which serves as a synergistic information link between resources and the users of resources. The role of ERIC/ECE as a disseminator of new idea, new research, and new products is discussed in relation to the overall goal of providing better education for children. This paper is to appear as part of a chapter entitled "State-of-the-Art in Educational Diffusion" to be published by the Tuskegee Institute and the National Federation for the Improvement of Rural Education. (Author/NH)

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DISSEMINATION AND UTILIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE AREA OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A DESCRIPTION OF SOME OF THE PROBLEMS*

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DISSEMINATION AND UTILIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE AREA OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A DESCRIPTION OF SOME OF THE PROBLEMS

Research findings have shown that the first eight years of life are especially critical to the future life of the individual. Investigators such as J. McV. Hunt, Benjamin Bloom, Jean Piaget, Maria Montessori and others have stressed the importance of these early years in the optimum development of the child. Unfortunately, evidence has shown that many children are not acquiring the basic academic and social skills needed for success in our society. As a result, there has been an increased demand for supplementary and improved educational programs, both within and apart from the formal school structure. This pressure has created a growing cry for information concerning patterns of child development, research results, and reasons for the success or failure of implemented programs in early childhood. In short, people want to know what works in what situations under what conditions.

The general strategies of dissemination and diffusion apply to the area of early childhood education. The plan of action chosen to show the potential benefits of a new way of doing something or to combat resistance to tested techniques is particularly important. If change is to take place, more than sending a message through an appropriate medium (television, person-to-person contact, or written word) to a user (practitioner, professional, or parent) is required. Information must be transformed and sent in such a way that the intended user will attend to it. Effectiveness of the message should

be critically evaluated. To be effective, it should be directed towards the appropriate audience, offered in terms understandable to that audience, and provide accurate and necessary data to enable the user to make meaningful judgments.

In the field of early childhood education, the wide range of educational levels of personnel and the great variety of occupational levels (ranging from professional consultant through program director, teacher, aide and parent educator) require multiple treatments of the same message. People tend to be convinced of a need for change or improvement through contact with a peer group rather than through judgments made by people in a higher echelon. To complicate matters, there is also the problem of the nonreader. It is not known to what extent mothers of young children read or what they read. This knowledge can be crucial, because parents, especially mothers, are much sought after as primary sources of improving children's home environments and attitudes towards school and society. Since a large majority of teachers in the area of early childhood education are untrained (Katz and Weir, 1969) they, too, can be expected to be nonreaders.

Among research and development specialists in the field, who are primary sources of information messages, there is more disagreement than agreement over which early childhood education approach to use. There are more descriptions than analyses of deficiencies. Integration of divergent views, support of replication studies, and reconciliation of a large body of contradictory findings are woefully lacking.

The need to establish a pattern of feedback loops between the researcher and practitioner in early childhood education is particularly important. Directors and teachers in any educational program for young children, whether Head Start, day care or nursery school, need feedback on how good a job they are doing, and ways to improve the situation. Many times the relationship between research and a real-life problem in the teaching environment is no more than accidental, or else a research and development program is so poorly packaged for the practitioner that it is not usable. Therefore, the necessary but difficult task is to establish dissemination channels to help provide effective means of communication and feedback. Ideally, the preschool teacher receives information from the researcher through a resource system (such as the ERIC Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education) and then feeds back the resulting impact of use of the information to the research and development specialist via the resource system. This exchange of data can become a high-powered link in a continuing cicuit of communication, strengthen diffusion and improve knowledge utilization.

No matter how excellent a program may be in vitro, no matter how well information about such a program is disseminated, the impact on an individual child is the ultimate result of the diffusion process. The need to change a program, and possible results and effects of such a change can be determined through feedback and communication. Children involved in early childhood education programs can, therefore, hopefully be spared trial and error procedures and ill-conceived or harmful experiences. Consequently, they are more likely to be affected positively by their exposure to the action programs resulting from information interaction.

Resource systems are another problem. Knowledge pertinent to early childhood can come from several sources, such as the federal government, research and development centers, state and local education agencies, television and newspapers. As stated by Havelock (ED 029 171, p. 11-30):

> There must be some one person or some nuclear group pulling together diverse resources, structuring them and developing and executing strategies for their effective dissemination and utilization, and doing so on a continuing basis.
>
> In other words, the resource system must act synergisticly (sic), bringing together a variety of messages and message components and focusing them, in combination, in sequence, and in repetition upon the potential user.

As an information analysis center, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education (ERIC/ECE) tries to serve as a "nuclear group" supplying a synergistic information link between resources, such as a Head Start Research and Evaluation Center, and the user, a Head Start teacher. Its role in the diffusion process is to furnish aid to those attempting to accomplish change by providing interpretative analysis and synthesis of 'tested innovations', by presenting the pros and the cons, by outlining the necessary steps and resources required to implement a change.

ERIC/ECE is directly involved in the dissemination of new ideas, new research, and new products, although the actual mechanics of changing educational practices is beyond its scope. The ERIC/ECE Newsletter communicates, via the written word, about topics and innovations of interest to anyone involved in early childhood education. By attending conferences, seminars and similar meetings, ERIC staff members have an opportunity to create awareness of what is available within the ERIC system. ERIC/ECE is also involved in the training of specialists, such as TTT's (Trainers of Teacher Trainers), to serve

as diffusion catalysts, capable of fulfilling a linking role between the clearinghouse and its many possible users. These 'gatekeepers', i.e., people who have the potential to influence others, can then teach others to be consumers of ERIC's services.

Diffusion can play an extremely important role in helping to solve some of the critical problems in early childhood education. While there may be no one best way to establish meaningful learning environments for the very young child, effective dissemination and diffusion of scientific and research-based information can go a long way towards providing better knowledge utilization for all children.

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